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Future Insurgencies in Latin America and the Caribbean:  
Implications for U.S. Operations

by

Gary W. Dodson  
Central Intelligence Agency

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, or the Central Intelligence Agency.

Signature: Gary Dodson

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The end of the Cold War appeared to have brought a “peace dividend” to Latin America and the Caribbean. The Marxist sponsors of insurgencies and the appeal of their ideology had suffered a severe blow. Indeed, democratic governments now fill the roster of the Organization of American States (OAS), with Cuba the increasingly glaring exception. Unfortunately, the region’s traditional image as an arena of endemic turmoil can not yet be consigned to the past. For example, the U.S. Department of State lists eight insurgent-type groups still operating in the region.<sup>1</sup> A survey of U.S. government experts suggests that over the next five years, a sizable number of the region’s states could face instability. (See Appendix I) With new twists on old grievances, new catalysts to replace communist agitators, and non-ideological sponsors with access to immense resources, *the evolving nature of insurgencies in the region will have marked implications for U.S. foreign internal defense operations in the coming decades.* To test this thesis, the following will identify the most likely characteristics of future insurgencies and array them against several factors in U. S. doctrine for Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID).

### **Economics Still Matter**

One does not have to be a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist to recognize that despite notable progress, a number of economic problems in the region are exacerbated by the “neo-liberal” policies of reformist governments. In such diverse and prominent cases as the Mexican, Cuban, and Bolivian Revolutions, a common motivation was the foreign or private control of natural resources and financial institutions—cornerstones of many post-Cold War economic models. Insurgent recruiters do not need a Che Guevera running about with communist tomes to point out the economic motivations for taking up arms.

For instance, the exceedingly skewed income distribution in Brazil would trigger any computer model that targets susceptibility for violent instability. In addition, agrarian reform issues, historically an important component of upheaval in the region, are likely to remain at the forefront in the coming years, despite the demographic trend toward urbanization. (See Appendix II)

Even if the democratic, free market-oriented nations make significant progress addressing the region's economic woes, South and Central America may remain susceptible to a "moralist" undertow. Above the level of mere survival, socioeconomics have often been second to moral motivations in driving the behavior of Latin American publics.<sup>2</sup> In modern Latin America, the French Revolution's economic and political egalitarian ideals have most been expressed through Marxist concepts such as the "classless society" and the assumed inevitability of international revolution.<sup>3</sup> The cachet of the Marxists crashed with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but the underlying vision remains potent and perhaps even accentuated by the rising expectations of democracy.

It is also worth considering that like the World War Two Japanese soldiers whom emerged from isolated outposts in the 1960s, there are likely to be diehard Marxists, Maoists, *focoists*, and their intellectual offspring grimly festooning the region for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the effective half-life of the communists could span the decades under consideration. There are certainly enough variations on the failed socialist revolutionary model to inspire generations of would-be social molders—a coterie in Grenada circa 1982 advocated importing a Tanzanian communal system to the Caribbean, for example.

### **The Indigenous Population as Ethnic Warriors**

Some Marxist revolutionaries attempted to harness the grievances of the region's indigenous population. According to anthropologist Xavier Albo, the predominately urban-based, Marxist-Leninist insurgents in Bolivia used Indian names and slogans to attract support from the countryside in the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Other insurgencies have actively recruited from the indigenous population, but with limited success because of language and cultural barriers. In the future, however, the grievances cynically exploited by the communists may become the catalysts for indigenous-led insurgencies with limited aims.

Currently, Indians use the sympathy their causes generate abroad to lobby for "innovative" national experiments in power sharing. However, many governments fear that some activists among the estimated 40 million indigenous will resort to violence to push for the resurrection of tribal government.<sup>5</sup> There was a small indigenous insurgency in Colombia in the 1980s, for example. Such insurgencies probably will not involve a broad political front allied against the government. Just as Marxist guerilla leaders had difficulty mobilizing the Indians, the motivations driving a prospective indigenous insurgency offer little to urban workers or non-indigenous peasants. Nonetheless, countering ethnic type insurgencies by addressing their root complaints may unintentionally cause serious disaffection among other elements of the society.

### **Secessionists and Sectional Threats**

The factor of space in MOOTW has come to the fore in the post-Cold War world because of the prevalence of secessionist groups. In the Western Hemisphere, one can discern the gathering storm clouds of future insurgencies based on regional interests. Many of the regional cases will probably be intertwined with the claims for autonomy simmering among indigenous groups and ethnic minorities. Regionally based

insurgencies could also emerge because some districts are perceived as economically impeded or underrepresented in the government of a given country. Insurgents generally take root in areas long the focus of anti-central authority.<sup>6</sup> In Latin America, the regional angle has traditionally featured bouts between the “center” versus the “periphery.” (A current example being the Shining Path, which despite its Inca trappings, is primarily interested in following a Maoist model of the countryside engulfing the cities).

### **The Narcotics and Insurgency Nexus**

The alarming amalgam of narcotics and insurgency has become the prime adversary for U.S. officials into the foreseeable future. As noted in Campaign Planning and the Drug War, “In the long run, America’s drug war is more critical for its national interests than regional conflicts.”<sup>7</sup> The narcoinsurgent problem is likely to become most dangerous in the Andean region where the transnational criminal groups’ links to insurgencies show no sign of abating. What makes the involvement of the ideologically nonpartisan drug cartels particularly pernicious is that their influence may be found in the shadows of any or all future economic, ethnic, or regional insurgencies.

### **Implications for U.S. Operations**

The preceding overview provides a set of assumptions about the future operational environment. The next step is to array these assumptions against several important aspects of current foreign internal defense doctrine. The doctrinal aspects to be assessed include most of the concepts encapsulated in the SLURPO acronym, the factors of space, and force, as well as additional MOOTW operational issues.

Future U.S. military planners contemplating assistance to a friendly government in the region can take solace in the fact that we have probably been there before. Indeed, a

good portion of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine is derived from previous experience in this region, most recently in Central America. "The underlying concepts of the conduct of small wars evolved largely from the Marine Corps' common experience gained in Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic before World War II."<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, there are two potential pitfalls to this apparent familiarity. If the post-millenium doomsayers are close to the mark, the next big crisis could resemble the anarchic Haiti of 1915 rather than the ideologically defined conflicts in Central America of the 1980s. Meanwhile, the U.S. military approaches the region with significant historical baggage that may make achieving unity of effort with our besieged friends difficult.

### **Unity of Effort**

Achieving unity of effort will also become more problematic because lingering suspicions about U.S. intentions will not be tempered by the perceived common enemy of worldwide communism. In addition, our expertise, which was geared toward fighting communists, may become perceived as a less valued commodity when the insurgencies are strictly homegrown. For example, an ethnic or regional insurgency may call for expertise in specific dialects in addition to Spanish, French, Dutch, or Portuguese. At the same time, Washington must avoid pursuing unity of effort with the foreign military forces if in doing so, these militaries are made the "sole" saviors of a country. In Uruguay, for example, the military and security forces crushed the Tupamaros insurgency but in the process replaced a vibrant civil democratic government with a military dictatorship.

### **Legitimacy**

The fight for legitimacy is the core of foreign internal defense; the strategic center of gravity is usually the support of the mass of the people. The case of Central America in the 1980s illustrated that democratization was a key to the defeat of the insurgents and the creation of conditions that would hinder their reemergence.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the prevalence of democracies in the region is a boon because aiding a fellow democracy will be perceived in the U.S. domestic political arena as a more legitimate mission than previous assistance to anticommunist, but often authoritarian regimes. Nonetheless, there are strains in many of the region's experiments in democracy that appear destined to undermine their legitimacy. Besides the resort to autocoups in Guatemala, where it failed, and Peru, where it appears to have succeeded, electoral laws have been altered to tamp down ethnic unrest in Guyana, for instance.

Preempting the insurgency by "making a better revolution" is a longstanding tenet of U.S. doctrine. The ability of most countries to enact widespread economic and social reforms increasingly relies on the government's standing in the international community, which is one component of its legitimacy. With the end of the Cold War dichotomy, though, embattled regimes can not simply play the anticommunist card and expect to receive unfettered aid. In addition, international organizations such as the OAS have taken up a greatly expanded mantle. Given the plethora of such organizations in the region, the U.S. may find itself more likely to be participating in an internal defense as part of a broad coalition—and not simply using an OAS fig leaf as occurred during the 1965 intervention in the Dominican Republic. Washington's overt leadership of operations may be seen as hampering the legitimacy of the assistance in the eyes of the host nation population. It is also conceivable that the United States will not be asked to

participate until smaller regional organizations such as the Caribbean Community, Andean Pact, or the Common Market of the South (Mercosur) have tried and failed to stabilize the situation. Mercosur's moves to thwart a recent coup attempt in member nation Paraguay demonstrates the growing autonomy of these organizations.

### **Attacking the Insurgent Leadership**

Raising doubts about the legitimacy of the insurgency's leadership—internally and among the domestic and international audiences—is an effective method of undermining the opponent. It is difficult to ascertain how many people will become insurgents because of the charisma and purported infallibility of a "great leader." (Adherents to the *focoist* model will be particularly hamstrung if Che and Castro are not reoccurring variables). However, it appears that psychological operations aimed at divorcing the leadership from the people may prove more complicated in the future. Marxist revolutionaries fermented at universities and among mainstream leftist parties. Doctors, lawyers, educators, students, and engineers were the occupations most represented in the leadership circles. These seedbeds are likely to perform a similar role in the future since the educated elite played leading roles in insurgencies predating communist influence in the region. Another constant is that insurgent leaders will probably tend to be young men—current conditions will have an impact on the next cohort of insurgent leaders sooner rather than later. As the catalysts for insurgency take on a noncommunist hue, however, the extent the leadership will rise from the actual "followership" rather than rely on a Leninist style vanguard will alter. The closer the leadership is to the aggrieved group, the harder to undermine its internal legitimacy.

## **The Factor of Space**

The factor of space is approached very differently by various insurgency theorists and practitioners, but it will almost certainly continue to play a pivotal role in the future. For example, an aspect of past U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine dating from the Greek Civil War (1946-49) was that a communist insurgency was by definition controlled and sustained from abroad, hence the government's first objective was to cut off outside assistance and isolate the battlefield.<sup>10</sup> In many conceivable future South American and Caribbean scenarios, however, it is less likely that neighboring states will voluntarily provide safe havens—as occurred throughout Central America in the 1980s. The approximately 30 remaining border disputes could provoke hostilities, as occurred most recently between Peru and Ecuador, but they are unlikely to motivate neighbors to abet the wholesale disruption of a fellow democratic trading partner. At the same time, an unintended byproduct of the current push toward greater economic integration will be the increasingly porous borders, including the reliance on transnational identification and personal documentation. Coupled with the possibility of an indigenous insurgency crossing over state boundaries and the transnational nature of drug sponsors, this trend calls for increased multilateral intelligence sharing and planning among regional players.

## **Sustainment**

Internal defense doctrine rightfully places a high value on attacking the insurgents' logistics and sustainment. Earlier communist insurgencies in the region relied to some extent on aid from Cuba or the Soviet Union. Except for the Shining Path, most insurgencies have cast aside Maoist prescriptions about self-reliance. For U.S. advisers, this likely dependence on outsiders represents a tempting critical vulnerability to attack.

As previously noted, some revolutionary entrepreneurs have already made symbiotic alliances with narcotics traffickers that keep governments off balance and unable to focus on a single objective. Unlike the past Moscow or Havana directed efforts, however, the insurgent and drug leaders have divergent final objectives, which will probably act to restrict the amount of aid when victory is seemingly nearest. Barring a significant shift in their strategy, drug cartel support will probably be predicated upon assisting a prolonged, but not necessarily ultimately successful, insurgency. For their part, most insurgents leaders are not inclined to take control of what would be labeled a pariah state if the drug cartels had too much overt influence. In a nonlinear future, the PRC could also reemerge as a revolutionary sponsor in the region (as part of a resurgent Communist Party gambit to reassert control or to gain economic leverage, for example). The networks that move large numbers of illegal Chinese immigrants through Central America and the Caribbean could be used to pass supplies to insurgents, for example.

### **Restraint**

*“At times it seems to me that the absence of bloodshed and death drives us desperate, as if we feel ourselves alive only when surrounded by firing squads and destruction.”*

(From the Carlos Fuentes novel, The Death of Artemio Cruz)

At the operational level, the focus on the narcocriminal links tends to downplay the political component of the insurgencies. Nonetheless, from a counterinsurgency perspective, escalating the prosecution of the drug war may increasingly threaten to expose our allied forces to corruption, and elevate the society’s violence level—with a concurrent rise in political instability. For example, in 1998 Colombia publicly announced the creation of a 5,000 man counterinsurgency task force to deal with the

increasing threat posed by narcotics cartels aiding insurgents. This force was slated to receive no special training in the “political” aspects of counterinsurgency.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the region does not have ethnic animosities at the level of a Rwanda, but many of the security forces are drawn from their country’s predominant ethnic group, raising concerns about restraint when confronting ethnic or regional based insurgencies.

### **The Factor of Force**

Although an effective counterinsurgency strategy leans very heavily upon non-military parameters, the factor of force--ours, those of our ally, and the insurgents’--will still play a role in future internal defense operations:

- U.S. Special Forces are likely to predominate in this arena for the foreseeable future as stipulated in current joint doctrine. However, a concern in the sphere of preservance is that the current heavy reliance on reserve elements to provide many of the aspects of a well-rounded counterinsurgency operation—such as Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations—will not be a given in the future.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, as the United States military prepares to implement the tenets of Joint Vision 2010, it will become imperative that “Fascination with technological capabilities should not blind Americans to technology’s limitations in small wars.”<sup>13</sup> The prospective hazards represented by an over reliance on technology cut two ways: The old bugbear of trying to overwhelm a low tech force with conventional weapons, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, facing insurgents with superior arms and communications thanks to drug money could become a paramount force security issue.
- Assessing the capabilities of our allied forces will be crucial because post-Vietnam foreign internal defense doctrine highlights the principle that the war remains theirs to

win or lose. Some of our prospective allies will confront future insurgencies with armed forces that have yet to fully grasp their roles in civilian regimes. Other militaries in the region are being oriented to serve as international peacekeepers; some of the skills entailed in that role, such as restraint and perseverance, will be useful in internal defense, but other capabilities will be lacking. Yet another group of foreign forces are skittish of any mission smacking of internal defense because of past human rights issues, Argentina and Chile being prime examples. On a positive note, the excellent liaison and training relations with many of the forces gained through organizations such as the Sixth Special Operations Squadron, which inculcates foreign air forces in the utility of air power across the conflict spectrum, could pay dividends in future conflicts.<sup>14</sup>

- Among the insurgents' forces, the composition of the fighters may share similarities with current and past conflicts. Indeed, most of the rank and file did not join Marxist insurgencies because of a burning desire to install instruction of the Communist Manifesto into their country's secondary schools. However, future regional and ethnic based insurgencies will instill unique characteristics into their forces. For example, U.S. experience in Central America in the 1980s demonstrated that Marxist insurgents had better discipline when it came to waiting for proper circumstances to go on the offensive, as Mao advises. Non-Marxist insurgents threatened to dissolve if left inactive, even if provided with a measure of logistical and political support. This synergy between the factors of force and time suggests that future insurgent groups not adhered by an international ideology may have difficulty moving among the protracted stages found in some insurgency theory.

## **The Role of the Media**

Current doctrine recognizes that any future counterinsurgency operation will almost certainly be conducted under the watchful eyes of international law and human rights organizations, and most importantly, the media. The U.S. press will be a particular concern because of the region's proximity to the United States, growing ethnic representation in this country, and shared history. For example, some elements of the press already reflexively paint the United States as "Once again arming a repressive Latin American army fighting... narcoguerillas."<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, technological developments in the coming decades will likely exacerbate "CNNitis;" allowing various players to use the press to instantaneously report on government excesses, in real time and worldwide, as was seen in Chiapas, Mexico in 1995. Sun Tzu's dictum that "the acme of skill is to achieve victory without fighting" may be especially relevant because an action at the lowest tactical level will increasingly have the potential for far-reaching operational and even strategic consequences. In addition, the surprisingly sophisticated Internet sites currently mounted by some insurgent groups and their international sympathizers may be seen as quaint stabs at "cyber media" by future insurgent practitioners of this type of propaganda.

## **Information Warfare**

The FID arena appears to be ripe for developments in information warfare in the next 15 years. Future insurgents may be tempted and able to mount hostile information warfare operations against U.S. and host nation computer networks since the insurgents will probably be less dependent upon such technology. There will be plenty of targets since U.S. ties to Latin America and the Caribbean include a larger number of

multinational corporations and shared intelligence databases on drugs and migration issues when compared to other insurgency-prone areas such as Africa. The region's response to the Y2K problem may provide an early indicator of the relative vulnerability to information warfare operations mounted by computer savvy insurgents.

### **In Riposte**

The thesis of this essay, that the evolving nature of insurgencies in the region will have marked implications for U.S. foreign internal defense operations in the coming decades, can be countered on at least two fronts. Firstly, one could argue that with the demise of the communist threat, the impetus for potential insurgencies will be drained by the safety valve of stable, U.S. supported, democratic states and the safety nets of the OAS and regional alliances. This optimistic scenario has been seen as a desired end state for the region since at least World War II, and even if it has become more likely, it always behooves planners to consider the most dangerous course of action. Secondly, a Special Forces adviser 15 years from now may wonder what difference it made when insurgent leaders were once predominately Marxist ideologues. One could argue that after all, an insurgent is going to act like an insurgent regardless of affiliation. Certainly, the operational methods for obtaining power espoused by Lenin, Mao, the Cuban *focoists*, and the Brazilian urban revolutionaries of the 1960s can be emulated by noncommunist insurgents in the future. Nevertheless, the highly political nature of MOOTW calls for understanding the ideology behind the organizational methodologies and tactics. In addition, one can point to the Clausewitzian notion of the interactive nature of war to support the thesis that the United States will significantly adapt its operations to counteract new types of causes, catalysts, and sponsors of insurgency.

## Conclusion

Historians have reproached the customarily prescient Winston Churchill for severely cutting the naval budget while serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1920s because he dismissed the possibility of a future Japanese threat. Similarly projecting the course of future insurgencies a decade and a half out in such a diverse region as Latin America and the Caribbean is a problematic exercise. Warnings in the year leading up to the recent insurgent unrest in Chiapas would have been dismissed as exaggerated and alarmist, for instance. It does appear that the region approaches the era after the post-Cold War era with as many challenges as achievements in the political and economic spheres. With or without communist support or inspiration, any one of the problems could trigger an insurgency given the right conditions. When a contingency arises five, ten, or fifteen years hence, the U. S. can not simply dust off and apply current foreign internal defense doctrine with no modification or, simply plug in a contemporary counterdrug strategy. The Cold War may be over, but the stakes remain high. To take just one consequence, a failure in the Caribbean or Central America could create a refugee crisis that literally washes up in front of U.S. Southern Command's Miami headquarters.

## Appendix I.

### Surveying the Near Term

An unclassified survey of Central Intelligence Agency analysts conducted for this paper reveals that among 20 countries in South and Central America and the Caribbean, there is a distinct possibility of internal instability arising there or becoming worse in the next five years:

- Not surprisingly, Colombia appears by far the country most at risk with Peru and Suriname also under a significant level of threat. Argentina and Costa Rica are seen as the least at risk.
- Analysts selected economic unrest in either urban or rural areas as the leading cause should an insurgency arise in half the countries. Ethnic tension accounted for the leading cause in the demographically similar Guyana, Trinidad, and Belize.
- Analysts expected narcoinsurgency or narcoterrorism to present at least “some” threat to stability in 14 of the nations.
- The resurrection of unreconciled and insurgency-minded communists is much less of a perceived threat as it is noted in only five of the countries, including Venezuela and Peru.
- Finally, 14 of the nations contain either peaceful factions agitating for a significant transition in how the country handles its affairs or influential figures in the opposition or outside the ruling elite who could incite violence against the government.<sup>16</sup>

## Appendix II.

### Brazil's Landless Movement: Planting Seeds of Revolution?

The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) is a prominent example of the possible future insurgency catalysts that are currently operating in the region's rural sectors. Most observers do not expect Brazil's leading social activist group to take to the hills anytime soon. However, the MST has erected a countrywide organization that bears more than a passing resemblance to the front groups that characterize the first stage of Maoist theory. One MST leader has publicly described the organization as close-knit and highly disciplined. The largely self-sustaining group has methodically built up a hierarchical structure with local, regional, and state bodies reporting to a National Directorate; at the same time, leaders delegate to the local members to protect operations if the national level is killed or incarcerated. Internal business is highly secretive. The leadership includes an element of "smooth hands"--intellectuals rather than farmers--who cut their teeth as student activists during the military regime (1964-85). The smooth hands have publicly expressed admiration for Cuba and lobbied to widen the group's agenda to include more urban concerns. However, its urban appeal is currently limited. For now, the MST's main activities are "occupying" government buildings and the preplanned "invasion" of uncultivated areas whereby hundreds of its members illegally parcel out the land. These invasions sometimes turn violent, although most of the victims have been from the MST to date.<sup>17</sup>

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